

CALVIN'S COMMENTARY ON THE PSALMS*
THE PREFACE AS INTRODUCTION

by
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This paper undertakes a look at some features of Calvin's commentary on the Psalms from the perspective of contemporary study of the Psalms.¹ The undertaking is obviously and admittedly anachronistic. The usual and scholarly way to describe and assess Calvin's interpretation of Scripture is to read it in the context of the traditions and practices of his own times.² But I do not have the learning to do that, nor is it the way I have for some years read Calvin's commentary on the Psalms. I rather, as surprisingly many still do, consult the commentary as a resource for Psalm interpretation today. When one does that, Calvin's work seems in some respects to be at home with the critical exegesis of the modern period. But in other respects, it belongs to another world--or better, a different mentality. An engagement between Calvin's approach and that of current Old Testament study of the Psalms is inevitable, and it is that engagement in which I am interested in this paper.

I want to enter the subject by means of The Author's Preface, over which stands the heading "John Calvin, to the godly and ingenious readers, Greeting." This preface is particularly well known because it contains Calvin's account of an important phase of his life, a quite personal and passionate narrative of the course of his career from student days to his office in Geneva. It is such an important source for Calvin's biography that one suspects the preface is known and used primarily in this way. So much of the preface is about Calvin that it can be understood justifiably as one of the literary conventions of the period, an author's apology and vindication of why and how he came to write the following work. It is that, of course. But my basic thesis is that read only as such, its purpose as introduction to the commentary and to the method of its comment will be missed. The preface not only introduces the author; it is a real introduction to the commentary itself.³

For that reason, the preface inaugurates the engagement between Calvin's commentary and current Psalm study. It stands in such contrast to the typical introduction to a critical commentary that its methodological character is easily overlooked. The typical introduction today will offer a detailed description of the Book of Psalms in terms of its content and arrangement, a review of the critical problems set by the material for a genetic

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understanding, an account of hypotheses and approaches to deal with these problems including the commentator's own conclusions. There is none of this in Calvin's preface. What and whether he thinks about such things must be learned from reading the commentary. Of course, in Calvin's time many problems of Psalm interpretation were those of Scripture in general; they were not yet specialized as they are today. And Calvin writes as if there were a general orientation to the problems of Scripture interpretation which his readers already possessed and he did not need to rehearse.

But there were issues and questions to be settled, and they do come up in the commentary. Calvin's scrupulous attention to the text led him to recognize many of the explanatory problems with which current criticism is occupied. But where current Psalm study resorts to the form-critical and cult-functional approaches, Calvin thinks out answers in terms of the traditional and scriptural opinion that David wrote most of the Psalms, and that it is David's intention and experience that is expressed in them. For instance, Calvin saw clearly the problem of the shift in mood in the prayer psalms; but where current study attributes the phenomenon to characteristics of a genre, Calvin explained it by the hypothesis that David recorded his prayers long after they were first made (pp. 52, 65). From time to time Calvin notes the liturgical character of the Psalms. But he makes nothing of this in terms of their history or the history of the book. He simply incorporates the consideration of this other identity along with their role as David's songs (pp. 37, 51). He recognized the introductory function of the first Psalm and attributed its place to "Ezra or some other person . . . who collected the Psalms into one volume" (p. 1). These few are only illustrations of Calvin's attention to critical problems. But they come up in connection with specific points in the text and are not gathered up in a systematic way in an introduction as a kind of subject in themselves.

What Calvin does discuss in his preface as introduction to the commentary is two subjects typically never treated in any significant way in the introductions to modern commentaries. The first is his intended audience, the readers he has in mind in composing the commentary. Calvin makes the (for current biblical scholarship) astonishing recognition of the role those for whom he interprets play in the creation and framing of his biblical interpretation. His open involvement with his readers is one major reason for the organization, style, and content of the work.

Calvin writes, he says, for "the edification of the Church" (xlix). His purpose is "to open up this treasure (the Book of Psalms) for the use of all the people of God" (xlvi). The commentary is not addressed to other scholars, even those of the Church. Its agenda is not composed of the questions set by

the problematical and hypothetical. For that reason, he says, he "generally abstained from refuting the opinions of others," even though this would impress peers and reviewers (xlix). Nor does he write for an amorphous general public whose interests and presuppositions are unknown. At every point, even in its intensely scholarly moments, the design of his work, its style and content, are shaped by a notion of the congregation.

Where Calvin does describe the Psalms, he discusses the material to be interpreted in terms of its usefulness to the reader. Note, not the usefulness of a critical method to explain the Psalms, but the usefulness of the Psalms. He tells the readers what they may expect from the study and use of the Psalms, and it is threefold. Book and commentary instruct in prayer. ". . . A better and more unerring rule for guiding us in this exercise (calling upon God) cannot be found elsewhere than in the Psalms. . . . Those things which serve to teach us the true method of praying aright will be found scattered through the whole of this commentary" (xxvii and xxxviii). Book and commentary instruct in praise. "There is also here prescribed to us an infallible rule for directing us with respect to the right manner of offering to God the sacrifice of praise" (xxxviii). Book and commentary will instruct in the conduct of life, for ". . . the Psalms are replete with all the precepts which serve to frame our life to every part of holiness, piety, and righteousness" (xxxix). One notices that in this broad classification of the uses of the Psalter Calvin has marked off the three primary genres of psalmic poetry with which form criticism works: prayers of lament, hymns of praise, and wisdom poetry.

The shape and strategy of comment is determined by his purpose to let the Psalms edify the readers in prayer, praise, and conduct. In his only characterization of the form of his comment on the Psalms, he calls it "a simple style of teaching" (xlix). The format of the current critical commentary on Psalms will be complex. There will be sections in the comment on one psalm dealing with translation, text criticism, literary and genre analysis, the setting of the psalm in society, history, and literature, an explanation of the language, and some kind of conclusion. Calvin's format is threefold. There is an introductory paragraph which gives the reader a summary description of the particular psalm. It provides a characterization of the whole, what the particular psalm is and says, as a context for the following exposition of the text. This little introduction generally summarizes the content of the psalm and the way it is arranged. It will discuss the author, especially where the psalm is not attributed to David or anyone. A proposal is usually made about the occasion of the psalm's original utterance. Some situation in David's life, known or suggested by the books of Samuel, is the usual option favored. The technical terms in the psalm's superscription are considered. Where the function of the psalm poses a special problem, its use may be discussed (p. 109).

Not infrequently Calvin will anticipate the following content by identifying points in the psalm that are crucial or difficult for the practice of faith. In short, it is in these introductory sections that Calvin takes up the questions of who, what, when, where, and why which occupy contemporary criticism. But he does not work with a fixed agenda. Frequently some of these matters are left to the following comment. Which ones are dealt with in the introduction seems to depend on his judgment of what will be helpful in advance for the readers to know.

The second part of the format is a translation from the Hebrew text. The translation makes it obvious how well Calvin understood the importance of translation as an interpretive act. The nuances observed in its execution and the disquisitions on the choices to be made in moving from source to target language show how thoroughly the translation was grounded in the resources for philological work available at his time. But even when dealing with such specialized matters as comparing the functions of the Hebrew prepositions *l* and *min* (pp. 35-6) or working out the semantic value of *chased* (pp. 42-3), Calvin writes with a simplicity and clarity free of technical terms to allow his general readers to follow the argument. In these and other matters that are occasions for scholarly intensity, Calvin does not lose an orientation to his audience. The items chosen for discussion, moreover, are those which affect the meaning of the text used by the readers. Even the agenda of his explanatory comment seems to be set by a concern with the use of the psalm.

The third part of the format is comment on sections of the psalm. The sections, varying from one to four verses, seem to be determined by content and function, though how the divisions are made is not said. The comment regularly addresses two general questions: First, how is the text to be understood? and second, how does the text so understood instruct belief and conduct? These two questions are kept quite distinct in the procedure for comment. Typically questions of explanation will be dealt with first, and then a transition to the second question is made by using rubrics like "from this passage we learn," or "hence we are taught," or "we may draw the general truth," or "let us learn from the example of David."

The distinction between the two questions and the way in which it is drawn and the importance of the relation and the way it is inferred are crucial features of Calvin's approach. He viewed the psalms as philological and historical actualities, texts that express the experience and intention of a person in the past. His agenda of explanation grows out of this view and deals with the problems it poses. In this he is quite modern, and his explanatory work can be seen in direct line of development with a contemporary critical commentary.

But he also views the text as the expression of the intention of the Holy Spirit. The way in which he moves back and forth between the intention of the writer and that of the Holy Spirit shows he does not think that there are two meanings, but that it is the historical linguistic meaning that is inspired. When he draws the lesson of the text, he does so in remarkable consistency with what he has decided the text means historically and linguistically. He gives the plain meaning of the text a role as instruction which is remarkable in the degree to which these Old Testament texts enter into and constitute the substance of Christian doctrine. In his preface, he says of the Psalms, "that here there is nothing wanting which relates to the knowledge of eternal salvation" (xxxix).

But when one asks how the lesson in the text is recognized, how the potential in the text's meaning is identified, and how it is qualified, the role of the doctrine formulated in the Institutes as a grid for reading the Psalms as Scripture becomes apparent. The interplay between doctrine and text is not subliminal and unconscious; it is open and intentional. Scripture is the source of doctrine, and so doctrinal questions and needs form the agenda of the application. He expounds the Psalms as texts that were written to teach the church how to pray, how to praise, and how to live.

In all these ways, Calvin lets his notion of his readers shape and inform the method of the commentary.

The second subject discussed at length in the preface is the author, Calvin himself. Some ten pages are devoted to a narrative of his experience and career (xxxix to xlix). The form which this little autobiography takes and the claims made in it, when laid alongside the comment on particular psalms, show that Calvin understood his own life to be an immensely important component of his interpretive approach. The self-understanding laid out here is central to his method of expounding the usefulness of the Psalms for his readers--and this is especially the case with the prayer psalms written in first-person style. Calvin introduces himself as a medium of the relation between psalm-text and his readers.

An important qualification must be added to this broad claim. Calvin does not, of course, regard the role of his career as the indispensable link between psalm and reader. Using a famous phrase, he calls the Book of Psalms "an anatomy of all parts of the soul," and explains that "there is not an emotion of which anyone can be conscious that is not represented here as in a mirror" (xxxvii). This notion of the psalm-text as a mirror was important in Calvin's comment; it repeatedly prompts his observations on particular psalms. He believed that what he called "the internal affections of David and others" (xlvi) as depicted in the prayers were continuous and consistent with those of his con-

temporaries. What form-criticism attributes to conventions of expression and structure belonging to cultic literary traditions Calvin locates in the typical patterns of consciousness which he observed in himself and others. In his commentary on Psalm 3 he says, for instance, that it is easy for every one of us "to conjecture from the feelings of nature" what David felt because of Absalom's treachery (p. 27).

But Calvin makes another use of his metaphor when he says that in writing the commentary, "it has . . . been a very great advantage to me to behold in him (David) as in a mirror, both the commencement of my calling, and the continued course of my function" (xl). That is, Calvin not only saw the text of the Psalms as a representation of the soul of every believer, but he found in David, whose experience and feelings are expressed in them, a reflection of his own conflicted career.

The little autobiography incorporated in the preface has two parts which tell, as Calvin put it, "the commencement of my calling" and "the continued course of my function" (xl). These are the two poles of comparison. Just as David was taken from the sheepfold and elevated to the rank of supreme authority, so God had taken Calvin from his obscure and humble condition and given him the honorable office of a preacher and minister of the gospel. Just as David was driven to the complaints recorded in the Psalms by afflictions he had to endure from those who belonged to his own nation and kingdom, so Calvin had suffered the same or similar things from enemies within his own congregation and religious community (xxxix).

Meditation on this correspondence was a source of strength and counsel to Calvin. By it, he said, "I know the more assuredly that whatever that most illustrious king and prophet suffered, was exhibited to me by God as an example for imitation" (xl). "In considering the whole course of David's life, it seemed to me that by his own footsteps he showed me the way, and from this I have experienced no small consolation" (xliv). It was precisely this usefulness of the Psalms in understanding and carrying out his vocation that became one of Calvin's most effective hermeneutical tools. It "assisted" him in understanding the Psalms and in applying their instruction to present use (xxxix). Because of his own experience, the Psalms were not for him "an unknown region" (xlvi).

It is important to note that the David in whom Calvin saw a mirror of his own career is not what would today be called "the historical David." He is not even restricted to the David known specifically through the books of Samuel. The prayers in the Psalms were for Calvin so realistically the words of David that each psalm written in first-person style implied its own occasion. Repeatedly Calvin turns away from any anxious discussion about the relation of a particular psalm to the story of David

with the judgment that the problem is relatively unimportant (e.g., p. 37).

The David of Calvin's mirror is a theological rather than a narrative identity. He is a theological type--a called and installed man of God who is opposed and afflicted. It is this typical identity, conceived in a theological rather than a biographical way, which often provides the relation between the psalm and those for whom Calvin interprets. When Calvin is drawing the lesson from a prayer-psalm, he frequently uses a first person plural style and speaks of "we" and "us" in the application. The style is a way of including the readers in Calvin's relation to David. They also, in his view, correspond to the type. They too are persons who are called and installed and have a career as the people of God to live out in the face of tribulation and opposition. True, the Psalms are the mirror of the soul in all its emotions. The mirror's frame encompasses us all in our human condition. But squarely in the center of the mirror stands David, and it is the correspondence between David, Calvin, and Christian that lies at the center of Calvin's hermeneutic, especially when he deals with the psalms composed in the first person.

In commenting on particular psalms Calvin does not adduce the correlation between himself and David directly. But beginning with Psalm 2, as Calvin explains and applies the text he fills out the comment with copious, repeated, passionate discussions of the experience of conflict and how the godly man is to deal with it. He describes all the forms which hostility can take, the various motives that drive it, the many stratagems enmity employs, its many effects on the afflicted, the diverse temptations and mistakes which beset the saints because of it. And if one asks where he learned all this and why he writes about it with such reality and vehemence, the answer is to be found in the preface, where his own experience of constant and bitter opposition is described as though he were living out the afflictions depicted in the Psalms.

The Psalms, especially the prayers, furnish ample and repeated texts for the topics of affliction. But Calvin's comment is not fancy playing upon the text. It is life resonating with the text. And always the focus of this hostility and the locus of its experience is the David who, as described in his first appearance in the commentary, "had the testimony of an approving conscience that he had attempted nothing rashly, or acted as ambition and depraved desire impel . . . ; who on the contrary, thoroughly persuaded that he had been made king by divine appointment, when he coveted no such thing, or even thought of it, encouraged himself by strong confidence in God against the whole world" (p. 9). How does Calvin know all this about David's motives and thoughts? Again the preface with its account of how Calvin came to his office in Geneva is the answer at hand.

If the reader keeps the preface clearly in mind, one will recognize repeated instances of Calvin's use of this hermeneutic to deal with both explanatory and theological problems which the Psalms present.

Typically, the lament-psalms feature unnamed enemies as a major element of the trouble described in the Psalms. Current exegesis is divided over what to make of these enemies, and contemporary Christian sensibilities are uneasy at calling others enemies, let alone praying against them. David, Calvin points out, "had well-nigh as many enemies as he had subjects" (p. 28), and that took care of the explanatory problem. In dealing with the theological problem, Calvin customarily warns that when we are afflicted by opposition, we must first take it as a divine chastisement to drive us to repentance of our own sinfulness. But having done that, which he assumed David had done in the penitential psalms (p. 27), we are to ask if the enemies in opposing us are also opposing God. David's opponents attack him whom God had made King and Messiah. Calvin's foes opposed him in his office as minister of the Word. This is the appropriate theological setting for prayer in the face of enmity. Christians must discern whether the hostility strikes at the identity given them by the election of God.

A number of the individual laments appeal to God on the basis of the righteousness of the one who prays. Calvin deals with this theological problem by the same reasoning. The story of David and the Psalms shows that David was slandered and condemned on every side. But David "had the testimony of a good conscience that he had attempted nothing without the call and commandment of God" (p. 38). The righteousness to which he appealed was not with respect to God, but the charges of his opponents (p. 84). It is a righteousness which belongs to all the servants of God, who accepts their upright endeavors (p. 64). To be ill spoken of for doing well was an affliction Calvin knew well, and he believed it was "an affliction which daily befalls the saints" (p. 38). The prayers of the righteous instruct the saints to appeal their cause to God in the face of the condemnation of the world.

Clearly, the Psalms have shaped and informed Calvin's understanding of himself and career. In turn, his own experience and his reflection on it have prompted and instructed his comment on the Psalms. This is so much the case that one has the feeling of reading Calvin's account of himself as much in the comment as in the preface. Here the hermeneutical circle seems almost perfectly closed.

That Calvin should have given his readers and himself such a significant role in his method of interpretation marks his work as precritical in the judgment of current biblical scholarship. The approach of modern critical study is so pledged to an ideal

of objectivity and neutrality with respect to the text, and so occupied with a notion of past history as the strange and alien that Calvin's approach excites suspicion and disease. Suspicion and uneasiness are the appropriate reactions, however. Calvin from his side raises the question whether critical scholarship is so boring because it either will not admit to an audience or has no audience beyond itself. And he would further inquire whether the pages of the typical current commentary on the Psalms do not reflect the self-understanding and career of its author as much as his does. What is lacking is a preface that faces these questions.

Notes

¹The quotations in this paper are taken from the first volume of the translation published by The Calvin Translation Society: Commentary on the Book of Psalms by John Calvin, trans. James Anderson (Edinburgh, 1845-49). A revision of the translation by Arthur Golding (1571) has been undertaken by T. H. L. Parker, but only one volume has appeared: A Commentary on the Psalms by John Calvin. Vol. I (London: James Clark and Co., 1965).

²For information about the writing of the commentary, see, among others, T. H. L. Parker, Calvin's Old Testament Commentaries (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), pp. 26-31; and also Parker's introduction to the volume listed in note 1.

³See the observations by T. H. L. Parker on page 12 of his introduction to the volume listed in note 1.